

THE FROG KING

It was too early for there to be so much light, so that when I woke my first thought was of snow. We had pulled the drapes before sleeping but they did almost nothing to darken the room, the snow caught scraps from streetlamps and neon and cast them back up. It was bright enough to see R. still sleeping beside me, cocooned in the blanket I had bought after the first night we spent together, when I woke shivering to find him bound tight in the comforter we were sharing, swaddled beside me. He repeated the word all that day, apropos of nothing, swaddled, swaddled, he had never heard it before, the sound of it made him laugh. He would sleep for hours still, if I let him he would sleep the whole day. He loved to sleep in a way I didn't, sliding into it at every chance, whereas almost always I slept poorly, uneasily, I woke finally with a sense of relief. He complained if I woke him—I'm on holiday, he would say, let me sleep—but he complained more if I let him sleep too long. We only had ten days together, his winter vacation, which he had decided to spend in Sofia while everyone else he knew went home. Mornings were my time to work, to spend with my books and my writing, my time to be alone; I would get up soon but for now I kept looking at him, his face bearded and dark, smoothed out by sleep. It was all I could do not to touch it, as I did often when he was awake, cupping his cheek in my palm or reaching around the curve of his skull. He had shaved his head at the end of the semester, I liked to run my hand around and around it until he ducked and told me to stop, annoyed but laughing, too; even annoyance was part of the pleasure we took in each other, we were that early in love.

I was still groggy with sleep when I turned into the main room, and I stood uncomprehending for a moment before I realized that R. had rearranged things in the night. He had moved the table to the middle of the room, and had placed my winter boots on top of it, beside the little tree we had bought earlier that week. Sticking up from the boots there were packages wrapped in newspaper, his Christmas gifts for me; he must have hidden them somewhere after he arrived, he must have gotten out of bed in the night, careful not to wake me, he must have been quiet as he moved the furniture. I caught my breath at it, I felt a weird pressure and heat climb my throat. I felt like my heart would burst, those were the words for it, the hackneyed phrase, and I was grateful for them, they were a container for what I felt, proof of its commonness. I was grateful for that, too, the commonness of my feeling; I felt some stubborn strangeness in me ease, I felt like part of the human race.



HE HAD SEEN SNOW for the first time that winter, and he loved to be out in it, to stand with his arms outstretched as it fell, his mouth open to the sky. We went out that afternoon, the snow already tracked through but still lovely; the streets were quiet for the holiday, all the shops were closed. We were wearing the scarves I had found when I opened the presents under the tree, which were long and knit in the same pattern, one yellow and one blue; we wouldn't ever be boyfriends who wore the same clothes, R. said, but one shared thing was acceptable, having one shared thing was nice. We didn't go far, just halfway down the block, where I whistled, a short upward swoop I repeated three times, the usual signal. She might not be here, I had said, she isn't always, she goes other places or maybe somebody takes her in, but she came quickly enough from her usual spot around the back of the building. She was beautiful in her way, tawny and medium-sized like most of Sofia's street dogs, too skinny and with mange along one side. She was happy to see us, I thought, happy as she always was to get attention, though she lacked the confidence of some of the other dogs; she stayed near the wall, wagging her tail but not coming too close at first. Even when she let us pet her she tried to keep her distance, cringing in a sidling motion that brought her body within our reach but kept her head angled away, a mixture

of eagerness and fear. Somebody had taught her that, I thought, somebody had beaten her, or many people had, but not in this neighborhood, here everyone was kind to her, she was a sort of communal pet. She lost some of her shyness when R. pulled the packet of treats out of his coat pocket, clumsy in his mittens, which he had to take off before he could tear open the packet and pull out one of the strips of leathery meat. She started whining when she saw it, prancing closer, and he crooned her name, Lilliyana, though that didn't mean anything to her, it was just a name he had invented, it suited her, he thought. *Ela tuka*, he said, a phrase I had taught him, come here, and he held out the treat so she could take it, which she did by stretching her neck and pulling back her lips, taking hold of it with her front teeth, like a deer plucking a leaf. He had bought the treats the night before, when we were buying supplies; she should have Christmas dinner too, he said. She let us pet her more vigorously then, finally coming close, even pressing her side against his legs as she begged for a second piece, which he gave her, though that was all for today, he told her, there would be more tomorrow. She seemed to accept this, she didn't keep begging once we turned away, as most dogs would have, I thought; she disappeared behind the building again to whatever shelter she had found.



WE FOUND THE TREE by chance one late afternoon. We were in a part of town I'd never seen before, on the other side of the city center, looking for a German supermarket, a chain that was popular in Western Europe but that had only the single store in Sofia. It was less a store than a warehouse, really, there weren't shelves but huge bins people pawed through, everything mixed together, a dozen kinds of chocolate bars in one bin, toothpaste and shaving cream in another. The chain had its own brand of food, and R. was craving something from his life in Lisbon, a frozen lasagna, and when we found it in an oversized freezer case he clutched it to his chest with happiness. It was a long walk from the store to the metro, longer because the sidewalks were caked with ice. R. scolded me as we walked, telling me to take my hands out of my pockets, to keep them free in case I slipped, as for whatever reason I did often enough; if it had been night he would have passed his arm through mine to keep me upright. R.

saw the trees first, in the window of a little shop that was full of Christmas decorations. Even from outside you could see how cheap they were, all metal wire and plastic bristles, but R. insisted that we needed one, and ornaments, a box of lights; I want to have a real Christmas, he said. It was maybe three feet tall, it hardly weighed anything but it was cumbersome, I held it in both arms like a child as we walked. I felt a little ridiculous sitting with it on the train but R. seemed proud, he kept one arm around it to hold it steady on the seat between us. When we got home, he wanted to trim the tree right away, and he opened the box of tinsel to find that it was far too large, we hadn't been paying attention, it was meant for a much bigger tree. He laughed as he wrapped it again and again around the branches; she was swaddled now, he said, it would keep her warm. Her, I repeated back to him, inquisitive, mocking him a little, and this gave him an idea: she needed a name, he said, and he decided to call her Madeleine, I don't have any idea where it came from but he loved to say it. He liked to give things names, I think it was a way of laying claim to them, and he called out to her every time he passed, almost singing it, Madeleine, Madeleine. He saved the box of ornaments for Christmas Eve, little glass balls we hung from hooks on the branches, tucked among the tinsel. We knelt to arrange them, and when we finished R. sat back on his heels. Isn't she beautiful, he said, taking my hand in his, but he answered the question himself, she is, isn't she, I think she's beautiful.



WE WENT TO BOLOGNA because it was the cheapest place we could fly: there were tickets for forty euros, a price I could afford. We packed a single carry-on each, anything else would have meant a fee, and rode in a cab to the airport's old terminal, which the budget airlines used. It was my first time leaving the country. During breaks, when the other American teachers left for places near or far—Istanbul, Tangier, St. Petersburg—I stayed behind; I didn't want to travel, I said, I wanted to be settled in a single place. I studied Bulgarian, I read, I wandered the streets downtown. But I did want to travel with R., to leave Sofia, where even when his friends were gone there was a pressure of secrecy, where it was too dangerous to hold hands in the streets, to kiss in public, however chastely, where everywhere

we had to keep a casual distance; I wanted to be with him in a place where we could be freer with each other, a place in the West. It was my gift to him, a getaway, a bit of romance. We arrived at the airport early enough to be first in line for the unassigned seats, and sat in the front row, where there was extra room for our legs. Even so my knees almost touched those of the single attendant who sat facing us, strapped into her foldout seat. She spoke English with an accent I couldn't place, not Bulgarian but something Eastern European, and she smiled slightly, kindly I thought, when the plane started down the runway, thrusting us all back, and R. moved his hand to cover mine where it lay on my knee.



WE BOOKED THE CHEAPEST HOTEL, too, a chain a good way from the city center, with a bus stop outside for getting to town. We arrived too late for any exploring, we'd have to wait until morning to see the city. It was hard not to feel depressed by our room, which had the corporate airlessness of such places, comfort sterilized of any human touch. It was on the second floor, overlooking the parking lot. It's not exactly a dream of Italy, I said, meaning it as an apology, but R. laughed, he drew the curtain across the glass and pulled me to the bed. Who cares about the view, he said, the bed is nice, that's all that matters, you should care about the bed, and then we were both laughing, one on top of the other.

The hotel's one luxury was the breakfast we found the next morning, a buffet of eggs and sliced meats, yogurt and fruit, a table overloaded with cakes and tarts. It was early still—we had set our alarms, we wanted the whole day for the city—and I needed coffee first, which meant a complicated machine with a digital screen, then waiting for the paper cup to fill. When I turned back, I saw that R. had covered our table with little plates, a sample from each of the sweets. He hadn't left any room for me, and I waited while he tried to clear a space for my coffee, shifting the plates around until one almost tipped onto the floor, he caught it just in time. I made a little noise, exasperated and amused, and he looked up at me and shrugged. He would take a single bite from each plate, then move it to one side or the other, sorting out the things he liked. I watched him for a while, and then Skups, I said, my tone half question, half disbelief, making a

gesture that took in the table with its plates, the room, the other people eating. He shrugged again, glancing around at the assortment of other travelers, businessmen mostly, a few couples. Who cares, he said, using his fork to dig into another piece of something, they don't know me, we'll never see them again, why should I care what they think?

I remembered this later, waiting for the bus that would take us to town. We were the only people in the little shelter at the stop, huddling together against the wind, which was sharper than I had expected; it wasn't very cold but it was cold enough for our coats, for the scarves we had draped around each other before heading out. Then R. stepped up onto the bench, he grabbed my shoulders and turned me to face him. Now I'm the taller one, he said, and bent down to kiss me, not a chaste kiss, he gripped my hair and tilted my head farther back to probe my mouth with his tongue. I tried to pull away, laughing: it was a busy road, we were in full view of the passing cars. But he held me tight, kissing me with urgency, until I realized that exposure was the point, that he wanted to show off, here where nobody knew him, where he could be anonymous and free, could live out an ideal of candor. He leaned into me, pressing his pelvis into my stomach so I felt his cock hard between us; it turned him on to show off like this, I had had no idea. I gripped him, using my body to shield us, I gripped him hard with both my hands through his jeans. I started to undo his belt, wanting to meet him in his daring, to show him I was game; and he moaned into my mouth before he pulled back and pushed my hand away. *Porta-te bem*, he said, slapping my face lightly and laughing, behave.



THE BUS LEFT US in the Piazza Maggiore, where there was a huge wooden statue in the center of the square, a cylinder painted an uneven green. The bottom half was featureless, the top carved into the torso of a frog, regal and upright, his lips drawn back in an expression at once benevolent and severe. Two arms crossed at his stomach, four long fingers hanging down from each; above the half-lidded eyes there was a crown with four prongs. Cables stretched down from its midsection, securing it to the pavement; wooden barriers marked off a space around it. It would be burned, the man working at reception told us back at the hotel when we asked, it was the

tradition, the old year burned at the turn of the new. I remembered something I had seen in a movie, Fellini maybe, a stuffed witch on a pile of kindling and old furniture, the trash of the past, the promise of an uncluttered future. I wondered why we didn't do it in the States, where we love to pretend to start afresh, where we love to burn things down. There was nothing like it in Bulgaria either, where New Year's was celebrated at home; families gathered in apartments and at midnight they set off fireworks from their balconies. It had frightened me my first year, the sound ricocheting off the walls as the little bombs fell into the streets below, where everyone knew not to be, they were impassible for a good half hour. Which was the opposite of clearing away: all over the city the explosions came down and nobody swept them up, the wrappers and casings littered the streets until the heavy spring rains. It wasn't a traditional statue, the man told us, there was a competition each year, artists submitted designs and the winner had his work displayed there, in the center of the city, for a week before it was burned. For us the frog is a symbol, the man said, it means poverty, here in Bologna, in Italy, so it means to burn poverty. You know the crisis is very hard here, he said, the austerity is very hard, it would be good to burn it away. He had apologized for his English, but it was very good, less stiff than he seemed in his jacket and tie; he was young, midtwenties, a college student in a university town. You should go, he said, it's a party, there will be music and lots of people and you can watch the fire, it's something you should see.

★ ★ ★

THERE WAS SO MUCH TO SEE, too much; I walked around in a daze of looking. We moved in and out of churches crowded with paintings, huge and smoke-darkened, the ceilings crammed with color, I got tired of trying to see them. R. was full of zeal, he wanted to see everything—who knows when we'll be back, he said. The dilemma of vacations, the exhaustion of the last chance. Everything became unremarkable, nothing moved me, it was all a blur of perfection. I wanted to get the bus back to the hotel, I wanted to rest my eyes. But just one more thing, R. said, paging through the guidebook we had bought, and he led me to a small museum, a house converted after the artist who had lived in it had died. There were just a few

rooms, open and uncluttered, the walls painted mercifully white; it wouldn't take long for R. to make his circuit. I followed him, barely looking at the paintings, which were small and unremarkable, or remarkable only for their plainness. They were quiet and unambitious, minor, I thought at first, still lifes and modest landscapes, interesting mostly for having so little to do with everything else we had seen; the painter had spent his whole life in this city but seemed indifferent to the examples it offered, to the virtuosity and gorgeousness it prized. I found myself looking longer, looking more slowly, I let R. walk on ahead. The same subjects appeared again and again, household objects, plates and bowls, not filled with flowers or fruit but empty, set against a plain background. I stopped in front of one that showed a pitcher and cups, white and gray on a tan surface, behind them a blue wall. Something held me there looking, something made me lean in to look more closely. The cups were mismatched in color and in shape, the pitcher rose oddly elongated behind them, the whole painting was eccentric, asymmetrical. There was a kind of presence in the painting, I felt, I could sense it humming at a frequency I wanted to tune myself to catch. I liked the seeming naivety of it, the way the simple figures had been simplified further, purified or idealized to geometrical forms, almost, but rendered bluntly, imperfectly. And the brushstrokes were imperfect too, visible, haphazard, the paint distributed unevenly, inexpertly; but that wasn't right, really it was striving for something ideal, that was what I felt, the frequency I wanted to catch. What I took at first for blocks of color dissolved when I leaned in, were modulated, textured, full of movement somehow, not the movement of objects but of light, which fell across them gently, undramatically. But that's not right either, it didn't fall across them, there weren't any shadows; I couldn't locate the light at all, or tell if the scene depicted morning or noon. It was as if the objects emanated their own light, which didn't move from one quadrant of the painting to another, as real light would, but vibrated somehow, giving a sense of movement and stillness at once. There was a promise in it, I felt, I mean a promise for me, a claim about what life could be.

★ ★ ★

VENICE WAS TWO HOURS AWAY by train, another unmissable chance. We wouldn't stay the night, the hotel in Bologna was already paid for, we would spend a few hours exploring and then come back. On the train I stared at the fields we passed, which were laid out neatly, in lines I realized I had never seen in Bulgaria; the fields alongside the train from Sofia to the coast were shaggy, inexactly drawn, like the fields I remembered from my childhood, my family's fields in Kentucky, nothing like this clean geometry. I stared at them, hypnotized, and turned away only when I felt R.'s hand on my ankle, calling me back. We were facing each other, I had my foot on the empty seat beside him, and he had hooked his fingers underneath the cuff of my jeans and was stroking me softly, privately, not looking up from his book. But I knew he wasn't reading, he was smiling just slightly, his eyes on the page, he was basking in how I looked at him.

★ ★ ★

WE HAD NO PLANS IN VENICE, had done no research. But it didn't matter, just to be there was enough, amid the capillary water and sinking stone; there was a kind of uniform beauty to everything, a blanket wonder. Every corner we turned made R. gasp, every church we stepped into, every statue with its marble frothed up like surf, like the involutions of thought. Fuck these people, R. whispered as we stared at a painted ceiling, fuck them for getting to live in a place like this. He was smiling when I glanced at him but I knew he meant it, or half meant it. He often said that he was born in the wrong place; shitty Portugal, he would say, shitty Algarve, the shitty Azores, shitty Lisbon, it should all have been different, his life was fucked. Sometimes I could bring him out of these moods, I could kiss him and say he had a new life now, his life with me, who knew where we'd end up, in Europe or America, who knew what adventures we'd have, and sometimes he pushed me away or turned his face from mine. We don't get to choose anything, he'd say then, we think we do but it's an illusion, we're insects, we get stepped on or we don't, that's all. When he talked like this there was nothing I could do, anything I did made it worse, whether I got angry or sad or tried to make him feel my own happiness, the happiness I felt so often just looking at him, as he slept or read, or stared into the screen of his laptop. It was an immovable force, this mood that descended on him

sometimes, and I worried that it was descending on him now, that it would darken the rest of our day. But it didn't descend. When we left the church and turned blindly around the next corner he pulled me into an alcove and kissed me, his hands on the side of my face. I can't believe I'm here, he said, it's like a movie, I'm in Venice with my American boyfriend. He laughed. My sister would be so jealous, she's always wanted an American boyfriend, and I got one first. And then he was off again, dragging me by the hand behind him. He did this repeatedly, pulling me into doorways and alleys to kiss me, always somewhere a little apart, though we were still noticed, people passing would stare at us or look decidedly away. One heavy old man scowled; a young couple laughed, which I minded more. R. seemed not to notice but I noticed, it was a weird reversal: he was the more open one here, and I was hyperaware, feeling the reflexes of fear though I wasn't afraid, I didn't think I was afraid.

Our only principle was to stay away from the crowds of other tourists who moved in migratory flocks, following the little pennant or flag the guides all held above their heads, tiny bright triangles on long stems. It meant not seeing the important things but I didn't care, their edges were rubbed smooth by too much looking, there was nothing for my attention to catch on in them. I liked the dark streets we turned into better, the narrow paths beside the canals. Even here there were restaurants and shops, nowhere on that island is indifferent to tourists, money from elsewhere is the blood of the place. We stopped on the footbridges and looked at the boats bundled up on either side of the canals, trussed in canvas, their wooden hulls deep shades of blue and green, their reflections darker shadows in the water. It wasn't late but it was getting dark already, at least where we were, the sun had abandoned the narrow alleys to an afternoon dusk. We had left the grand palazzos behind, the churches; where we were now there were plastic shopping bags filled with trash beside the doors. This is where the people live, R. said, a trick of English making him sound like a revolutionary. Then he laughed and pointed ahead, at a bright yellow bag with the letters BILLA on it, its red handles tied off in a bow. It was the store we went to all the time in Mladost, our neighborhood store. I knew it was a big chain, that you could find them everywhere in Europe, and still it felt like a bit of good fortune to stumble across it here.

R. pulled out his guidebook then, with its useless maps, he was afraid we would lose the light before we saw San Marco. He started walking more quickly while I hung back, protesting; it didn't matter, everything was beautiful, everything was something we hadn't seen before and wouldn't see again. But he insisted, increasingly frustrated as the map refused to align with the streets we walked; he was better with maps than I was but not by much. He got annoyed with me for walking too slowly and stopping too often, but I wanted to take photos of everything, the buildings, the canals, the laundry hung out in the damp air to dry, the mask shop with its window of carnival grotesques, backlit through the metal grill that had been pulled down. R. was growing frantic in a way I didn't understand. We would lose the light, he kept saying, as though he were an artist imagining a scene, I want to see it before we lose the light. So I put away my camera and walked more quickly, I kept my eyes on R. to avoid being distracted by anything else. And he did find it, finally, by luck mostly, I think, suddenly we turned and it opened out before us, after the cramped alleys the expanse of the square, beyond it the horizon of water. R. turned to me, smiling, and surely it wasn't at that moment that the bells began to ring, it's a trick of memory to stage it that way, but it is how I remember it, the birds flying up, everyone turning to the Campanile, as we did, its top still bright as it caught the last of the sun. Merchants were walking through the crowds, hawking toys for children, spinning tops that burst into LED color as they helicoptered up. All that was new there was evanescent, the toys, the tourists, R. and I; all that was lasting was old, worn dull with looking though still I wondered to look at it, the centuries-old basilica, the bells, the gold lion on its pedestal, the sea that would swallow it; and everywhere also the books I had read, so that look, there, I could almost convince myself of it, Aschenbach stepping from uncertain water to stone.



I HAD A MIND FULL of useless things, I had always thought, or useless since graduate school, where they had been a kind of currency, the old stories and stray facts that were all that remained of the years in which I had wanted to be a scholar. The books I had read! But in the churches of Venice I found a use for them, I could read the paintings for R., or not the paintings but the

stories they told: Joseph of Arimathea, Mary and Martha, Sebastian nursing his arrows. In churches in Bulgaria the paintings were more or less mute to me, but here they made a story I could read, and as I told it to him I saw the pleasure R. took in it, the way he looked at me and then at the painting, I loved to see it. I have a crush on teacher, he said, whispering, and then he smiled his smile that meant happiness, his whole face beaming, turning toward the painting now though I knew the smile was for me. Later, back in Bologna, where we arrived on the last train after all the restaurants had closed—we ate shrink-wrapped sandwiches and chocolate, shared a little bottle of prosecco, all of it from a twenty-four-hour shop near the station—he asked me to tell him more, it didn't matter what. Tell me a story, he said, stretched out in bed as I lay beside him, running my hands across his chest and stomach, feeling his cock grow thick when I grabbed it, tell me another story.

★ ★ ★

I WOKE A FEW HOURS LATER too hot, stifling in the bedclothes. I switched on the lamp beside the bed. R. slept so deeply I never had to worry about waking him on the nights I couldn't sleep, when I spent hours beside him reading or writing. But this time he did wake, or half wake, as I lay with a book propped on my stomach; he turned toward me and linked his arm through mine before settling back into sleep, his face pressed against my shoulder. I looked at him for a long time before going back to my book. They could make a whole life, I thought, surprised to think it, these moments that filled me up with sweetness, that had changed the texture of existence for me. I had never thought anything like it before.

★ ★ ★

I WANTED TO MAKE him laugh at first, I meant it almost as a joke. We needed to laugh: it had been hard to return to Sofia after our days in Italy, more snow had fallen but by the time we arrived the city had turned gray again, the holidays were over, the cars kicked black sludge from their tires. And now it was his last night in my apartment; in the morning he would gather his things and go back to Studentski grad, his friends would arrive in

the afternoon. We would return to our uncertain arrangements, emails and dates that he might break at the last minute or without any notice at all, those were the conditions, they were non-negotiable. He hated it, he said, he didn't want to go back to hiding, and throughout the day his dread had increased and darkened, coloring everything, until by nighttime he could barely speak, he had folded in on himself as he did sometimes; it was hard for me to reach him, to have any effect on him at all. We watched a movie sitting side by side on the couch, I don't remember what it was, something lighthearted, romantic, though he hardly laughed. We never really watched movies together, it was always a pretense, we would kiss and touch each other and then forget the movie, but now it was all I could do to get him to kiss me back. Finally he let me pull him up from the couch, I folded the computer shut and pulled him half resisting into the bedroom. He resisted less there, standing beside the bed, he opened his mouth to me, he let me draw him close and press my pelvis against his. He raised his arms for me to pull his shirt up and off, and I felt the mood shifting already, it lightened as his passivity became a game almost, his passivity and my insistence as I struggled with the buckle of his belt, the button on his jeans; I could feel him almost smile as I kissed him, as he answered me back more in his kisses, his tongue pressing against mine. I pushed his jeans and underwear down, breaking our kiss to kneel and hold them at his ankles while he pulled his legs free, kissing his cock, which wasn't hard yet, just once before I rose again. He moved to kiss me again but I pulled away, then shoved him back, not hard, he could have resisted but he didn't, he fell backward onto the bed. Onto our bed, I thought, which was what it had become in those days, not a lonely place but a place that belonged to both of us, a loving place; it was something I could think to myself but not say out loud. I took off my own clothes quickly and then launched myself on top of him, which made him flinch and laugh, just once and as if against his will. I caught myself with my hands and when he reached out his own hands, bracing them against my chest, I grabbed them one by one at the wrist and pinned them above his head. He made a noise at this, a little growl, interested and interrogative, as I ground against him, his cock harder now, mine fully hard. I lowered my face but dodged his kiss again, teasing him, and instead kissed his collarbone, first one side and then the other, and then the inside of his arm, just below the elbow, where I knew he was

ticklish, and then I licked the pit of his arm, slowly, because I loved the taste of him, first the right and then the left, and he growled again. He was harder now, he pressed his hips up against mine, but I lifted myself off him, beyond his reach. He moaned in frustration, he tried to pull his hands free but I held them firm; *Porta-te bem*, I said to him, and then I did kiss him, I put my tongue in his mouth and he sucked at it hard, tasting me but tasting himself, too, that was what he loved, the taste of himself in my mouth. I broke off the kiss and dipped my head to his chest, kissing first one nipple and then the other, which he didn't really like, he tolerated it, and then to go farther I had to let go of his wrists, which didn't matter, he kept them obediently above his head. I kissed his ribs and then his stomach, always one side and then the other, keeping a symmetrical pattern, keeping it at his pelvis, too, pressing my lips to his right hip and his left but avoiding his cock, moving quickly. He made a noise of complaint but kept his arms where I had left them, still playing our game. He jerked a little when I kissed the inside of his thighs, he was sensitive there, too, but he didn't try to stop me, he was being good, he let me do what I wanted. But I wasn't sure what I wanted, or what I wanted had changed. I had thought I wanted to make him laugh, that after that I wanted sex, but I didn't want sex, I realized, or not only sex. I had let my knees drop off the end of the bed as I moved lower, soon I was kneeling on the floor at the foot of the bed. He was relaxed, more or less, his legs were outstretched, his feet splayed to either side, but his whole body tensed when he felt my lips on the sole of his foot, which he snatched away, I had to grab it and pull it back. He was ticklish there, too, he didn't like to be touched there. It had been a line drawn early on, when it became clear I was more adventurous in sex, had a wider palette of things that turned me on; I hope you're not into that, he had said, laughing, it's gross, I don't want you to be into that. It was a difference between us, that fewer things put me off, that I could be indifferent to something and still indulge it for my partner's sake. That was what he did now, I guess, when he let me pull his foot back to me, holding it in both hands as I kissed the sole again, the arch and then the pads at the base of his toes, each of them, and then the toes themselves. What are you doing, he said, and I couldn't answer, I wasn't sure what I was doing as I took the other foot in my hands and repeated what I had done with the first. I was moving slowly now, the tone had changed; I didn't want to make him laugh

anymore, I didn't know what I wanted him to feel. I kissed his ankles next, at three points, moving from the outside in, from right to left on his right leg, from left to right on his left, which would remain my pattern. Skups, R. said, a question in the way he said it, his name for me or our name for each other. But I didn't answer, I made another band of these kisses, slightly higher than the first, and then another; I would cover him in kisses, that was what I wanted to do, and I would do it even though I could feel R.'s impatience, even as he said again *Skupi*, and then, don't be cheesy, which was his warning against too much affection, against my surfeit of feeling. I ignored it, moving up another inch. It would take a long time, I realized; when you imagine something like that you don't think about how long it will take, how large a body is, how small a pair of lips. But I would do it, I decided, a kind of unhurriedness opened up in me, a weird wide patience I sank into. I strung kisses across him, his calves and knees, his thighs, the flesh firm in the center and giving at the sides. They were places I had never touched him before, some of them, and this gave gravity to the moment, more gravity; I whispered I love you as I kissed him, and then two kisses later I whispered it again, which became a new pattern, to whisper it again and again. His cock was soft when I reached it, as mine was, I hadn't noticed it until then. I almost passed over it, kissing his upper thigh on the right and then the left, but I didn't skip it, I kissed it, too, as I had kissed the rest of him, and said again the words that somehow became more real with repetition. Usually words wear out the more you use them, they become featureless, rote, and more than any others this is true of the words I repeated to R.; even in our relationship that was still so new they had lost most of their flavor. I remembered the fear I had felt the first time I spoke them to him, weeks before, when they had had all their force; I had been terrified, really, not so much that they wouldn't be answered (they weren't, it would be days before he repeated them) as that they would scare him away, that he would startle like the wild thing I sometimes felt he was. But now we said them often, when we left each other and were reunited (even if it was only a room we left, only minutes we were separated). But repeating the words now didn't dull them, it called them to attention somehow, to service, it restored them, and they became difficult to say again; I found myself almost unable to speak as I whispered into R.'s silence, kissing the soft flesh of his stomach, the firmer flesh over his ribs, his nipples and the

patch of hair at the center of his chest, his collarbone, the taut skin at his windpipe. His arms were still raised but he had folded them at the elbow, crossing his forearms over his face. I kissed his armpits again, the exposed undersides of his arms, and then (I was kneeling now, my knees on either side of him) I took his arms in my hands and moved them away from his face. He hadn't uttered a sound in all that time, the fifteen or twenty minutes it had taken me to make my way up his body, not since the interrogative of my name, the admonition I ignored; there hadn't been any change in his breath, or none I had noticed, and so I was surprised to see the tears on his face, two lines that fell toward his ears, he hadn't wiped them away. He didn't try to hide them when I moved his arm, or tried only by turning his face slightly, as if he didn't want to meet my gaze (though his eyes were shut, there was no gaze to meet). I paused, wanting to speak, to ask him what they were for, his tears, but I knew what they were for, and so I hung over him a moment before I continued kissing him, the line of his jaw, his chin, his cheek and lips, which didn't answer mine, which suffered themselves to be kissed, his ears, the tracks of his tears, his eyes. It was a kind of blazon of him, of his body, I love you, I whispered again and again to him. And then, when I had laid the last line across his forehead—a garland, I thought, I had garlanded him—You are the most beautiful, I said to him, you are my beautiful boy, and he reached his arms up and pulled me down on top of him, clutching me. You are, he whispered to me, you are, you are.

★ ★ ★

THEY USED SOME KIND of accelerant, they must have, so that when the three children touched their torches to it (angling their bodies away, keeping the greatest distance between themselves and the fire) the flame leapt up the wood, from the base to the ridiculous crown the whole frog blazed up. And with it there was a huge explosion of sound, air horns and rattlers and little handheld bells children jingled, and above them all human voices, the crowd cheering both the fire and the New Year, which had just struck. There were hundreds of people in the square, pressed tight near the wooden barricades that held them back from the fire but more spread out near the edges, where we were; there was space here for people to toast one another,

with wine in plastic cups or little glass bottles like those R. had bought for us, prosecco with a twist-off cap. After we drank I leaned toward him and cupped his face in my palm and we kissed. I moved my mouth in a way he liked, kissing first his upper lip and then his lower before I drew away, hanging my arm around his shoulder. And then, as the statue burned—it was huge, it would take a long time to burn—there was another sound, a salute of drums and a burst of guitars, and then the far corner of the square lit up with floodlights, and there was a new shout from the crowd as it shifted toward the platform where the band had begun to play, four skinny boys bent over their instruments. There was a keyboard as well as the guitars and drums, it was an American sound, I thought, which contrasted with the stone buildings around us, with the pagan fire. R. and I didn't move as the crowd thinned further; we wouldn't stay, it was cold and the band wasn't very good, we would watch the fire a little longer and then go back to the hotel. R. pulled away from me suddenly and reached into his coat pocket, taking from it the packet of raisins he had bought earlier with the wine. I almost forgot, he said, it's almost too late. He handed me his bottle and took off one of his mittens so he could open the packet. Give me your hand, he said, so I put the bottles on the ground and held it out to him, taking my glove off as he asked, and he counted out twelve raisins, placing them in my palm in a single line from my wrist to the tip of my third finger, then counting another twelve for himself. It was the Portuguese tradition, he had told me, a raisin for each month of the year that had passed, a wish for each month of the year to come. He looked at me and smiled, Skups, he said, *feliz ano*, and we kissed again. He ate his all at once, tossing them in his mouth and putting his mitten back on before he leaned down for his bottle and turned to watch the fire. But I didn't watch the fire, I kept my eyes on him, though it was cold and I wanted to be back in the hotel with him, in the warmth of our bed. I took my time, I put the raisins in my mouth one by one, thinking a wish for each, though all my wishes were the same wish.